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Musical Ottumwa

By the time supper dishes were washed on the evening of May 25, 1907, the rain was pelting so hard on tin porch roofs and blooming peony bushes that Ottumwans who were not in a musical mood decided not to get out rubbers and umbrellas and huddle off to the Opera House for the May Festival of the Choral Society. Despite the weather a good crowd turned out, for Ottumwa was a musically-minded city and the performance of Handel's "Messiah" was recorded as "one of the most notable musical events ever held in the city".

This Choral Society, organized many years earlier, sang under the direction of the seasoned conductor, James Swirles, and, as was usual, visiting artists — this time from Chicago and Des Moines — added glamor to the evening's performance. The 54th Regimental Band, always willing to introduce the main attraction with a stirring overture and conclude the program with a rousing march, that evening played the familiar "William Tell", "exceptionally well", under the direction of another of Ottumwa's fine musicians, B. O. Worrell.

Such musical evenings were not rare in Ottumwa; ever since the itinerant singing teacher and his tuning fork had begun to appear annually with the first snowfall many decades earlier, Ottumwa had been singing. In addition to these elaborate May festivals, pageants and operettas were presented; choruses were sent to the Eistedfods in Albia, Williamsburg, and on one memorable occasion in 1903 in Des Moines, where the "sum of \$385 was carried [away] . . . by the Ottumwa singers", the chorus choir capturing the main prize of \$250. The mixed chorus and some soloists were also awarded prizes. One of the earliest of these soloists, a lovely soprano, was Regina Neville Evans. Somewhat later came Maude Edmunds, soprano, Nellie Brown Hughes, contralto, Cyrus Blake, baritone, and Edward Mather, a powerful bass.

Around 1900 there was a men's quartette called "The Ottumwans", which sang in neighboring towns as "The Quartette that made Ottumwa famous". Their first tenor, Edward Weeks, is still — 1947 — living in Oklahoma. The others were James Swirles, William F. Muse, and Eugene Peterson. Ten years later another male quartette was exceedingly popular locally. Its members were Frank Daggett, Frank Burton, Burchard Peck, and Grant Keyhoe. Down

through the years there were many outstanding small choruses, quartettes, and groups like the Romany Singers and the Basque Carolers.

For awhile with the coming of the radio, recorded music, and the movies, interest in group singing lagged, but recent years have brought a decided swing back. Some of the more active ensembles in recent years have been the Rotary Chorus, which made a concert trip to California in June, 1938, the PTA Mother-singers, the American Legion Chorus, and the Morrell Male Chorus, which is still functioning with Margaret White Stoltz, a concert soloist, as director.

The dean of Ottumwa's early musical residents was J. H. Rheem, who came to Ottumwa in 1873 with his wife and three small daughters. He was one of the pioneer singing school teachers. People in the community were full of enthusiasm but short of cash, so the "Professor" told interested singers to join his classes anyway and pay in produce, or as best they could. His daughter says the family had never lived as well as it did that first winter in Ottumwa.

"Professor" Rheem taught music in the public schools and founded the first conservatory in Ottumwa in the old Y.M.C.A. building, hiring quite a notable faculty. He was also the director of some of the early choral groups. One of his

leading sopranos, Bertha Roemer, used to go to Oskaloosa, while the Oskaloosa prima donna, Virginia Knight Logan, came to Ottumwa, adding prestige to each other's productions as "visiting artists". An elaborate pageant, "Belshazzar", was staged and taken, with difficulty, to other cities. Rheem was instrumental in founding, with Carl Schawbkey, the 54th Regimental Band, which received national acclaim in 1909 under B. O. Worrell.

Rose Elizabeth McGrew, who became an outstanding soprano, was born in Ottumwa about 1875. This somewhat frail looking child, with her long red curls, became a familiar figure in the usual home talent performances at Ottumwa until her family moved to Denver when she was eleven years old. Wealthy people there became interested in her and financed her study abroad. After eight years of intensive work she had a repertoire of seventy operas and sang in the Royal Opera at Hanover and Breslau three times weekly during the season for thirteen years. She also sang in the Royal Opera at Vienna where she created the rôle of Octavian in Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1911 and was given a great ovation.

While in America during the first World War, she returned to Ottumwa to visit relatives. Of course she gave concerts — the largest at the

Grand Opera House, which was packed to the rafters with admirers. Mrs. Isabelle M. Hofmann, her accompanist, tells this story.

They were rehearsing one day when suddenly Madame McGrew said, "Let's go up to the house and practice where Aunt Linnie can hear us." Aunt Linnie was a little old Quaker lady. They picked up their music and went to the house where Madame McGrew boomed forth in her best operatic manner, while Aunt Linnie, in her tiny white cap, sat over in the corner. When Rose was through Aunt Linnie looked up and said mildly, "Thee hollers right well, Lizzie." After her return to Denver she was given a contract at the Metropolitan, but a throat infection prevented her from carrying on her operatic career and she accepted the chair of music at the University of Oregon at Eugene.

Contemporary with Rose McGrew was the pianist, Nellie McNett, born in Ottumwa in 1874. After several years' study with Joseph Gahm (the accompanist for Hans Albert), she graduated from the Chicago Musical College, before going on to Paris and Vienna for further instruction. An early death cut short a promising career.

Ella Dow Cloutman, the daughter of a prominent Civil War officer, was another of Ottumwa's singers of the early 1900's. A Major Hamilton,

enthralled with Ella's rich soprano voice, financed her debut at the Opera House. With the funds from the concert she went to Boston, graduated from the Conservatory, was soloist for two years in Old South Church, and travelled through the East with a ladies quartette. People said she had the voice for grand opera but not enough of the grand manner. Unable to overcome her self-consciousness, she returned to Ottumwa where she taught for many years, was soloist in scores of productions, and sang at the Congregational Church and later at St. Mary's.

Three charming Ottumwa girls of bygone days went a long way in the musical world: Mabel Dewey, a dramatic soprano; Myrtle Jersey, a beautiful, talented girl whose success in musical comedy and light operas on Broadway warranted a concert tour of Australia and New Zealand; and Nellie Mae Brewster, who went to New York and had several successful seasons as soloist with top flight orchestras of that era. When you hear Gus Edwards' song, "By the Light of the Silvery Moon", think of Nellie, because she helped popularize it in 1909.

Vernon Mason Stiles, popular tenor of pre-World War I days, was born in Ottumwa in 1876. During his early boyhood the family moved to Kansas City. Before he was twenty he went to

New York to study, later touring the country as the tenor lead in "Madame Butterfly", "Robin Hood", and other light operas. Then came bigger things — study in Paris and Vienna, opera in Riga, St. Petersburg, and Cologne. At the close of this period at the repeated requests of his friend, Siegfried Wagner (son of the great composer, Richard Wagner), Vernon Stiles went to Bayreuth to sing the role of Parzifal. But the first World War broke out, and he returned to America, where his repertoire of German operatic roles was in little demand. He never again regained the reputation he had enjoyed.

So many Midwest towns have had in their musical history a German violinist who has appeared mysteriously from nowhere, taught piano, fiddled in community programs, and then disappeared after a few years, leaving no trail. Ottumwa had one, better than the average, perhaps, for they called him the "Little Wizard of the Violin". Hans Albert, a small, red-headed, homely man, was born in Bavaria, Germany, of very poor parents. So early did he reveal his genius that he was educated by the Emperor and Empress of Germany, and at the age of sixteen he was concert master for the Emperor's orchestra at Berlin and for the Imperial Orchestra at Vienna.

At the age of nineteen, already a musician of

some renown, Hans Albert came to America to be concert master for Theodore Thomas's famous orchestra. He was considered one of three great violin masters of the world and first in tone quality and expression. But his career was brief. He was a rare artist but a weak man. While still very young, he began to wander over the country, and it was during this period that he drifted into Ottumwa to teach and play, until restlessness again overtook him. One of his last concerts there is still remembered and talked about. He was playing for a large audience of Welsh music lovers, and as he played his farewell encore — the haunting melody "Liebestraum" — tears ran down his cheeks and down the faces of his listeners who left their seats and stormed upon the platform. Loved and admired, Hans Albert left exquisite music for Ottumwa to remember.

This story does not include the concerts and programs given by artists from outside Iowa, but, these were no doubt as frequent in Ottumwa as in other cities of its size. It would be interesting to know how well these musical programs were patronized. When Ole Theobaldi, the "Wizard of the Violin", gave a concert at Ottumwa on April 22, 1903, prices ranged from twenty-five cents to one dollar and the program was heard by a "small but enthusiastic audience".

Jean Duffield was one of the finest pianists Ottumwa produced. Born at Keosauqua and a resident of Omaha in later life, Mr. Duffield contributed to Ottumwa's musical life many years of exceptional teaching and accompanying. At one time he was accompanist for Paul Althouse, as well as for other artists of ability, touring extensively with them. Three church organists should also be mentioned in a discussion of Ottumwa musicians — Charles Koett, Emma Holt, and Albertina Scheiwe, daughter of Johannes Scheiwe, an artist.

A familiar figure on the conductor's stand of the first two decades of the 1900's was B. O. Worrell, who achieved perhaps a bit more than local renown as a teacher, bandsman, and composer. External symbols of success may have been lacking in his life, but Frederic Stock, the late conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, once wrote to Worrell, "You have the faculty of instilling in your pupils a greater love of music than any man I have ever known." What higher praise could there be for a small town musician?

Ottumwa also had its share of musical meetings. In June, 1903, for example, it was host to the Society of Music Teachers of Iowa and the opening program was a concert by Ottumwa musicians. It included the chorus from "Elijah", sung by the

Ottumwa Musical Club Chorus under the direction of Mrs. Frances E. Clark, an aria sung by Edward Weeks, piano numbers by Jean Duffield, vocal solos by Nellie Mae Brewster and James Swirles, and numbers by the Colonial Ladies Quartet.

Brief mention may be made also of the Department of Music Education of the National Educational Association, which concerns two former Ottumwans — Mrs. Frances E. Clark, public school music supervisor at Ottumwa about 1895 to 1905, and Miss Alice C. Inskeep of Cedar Rapids, a graduate of the Ottumwa high school in 1893, who had been a teacher in the intermediate grades at that place. In 1907 Philip C. Hayden of Keokuk, editor of the national music magazine, *School Music Monthly*, called together at Keokuk supervisors of music from many of the larger cities in the United States. Mrs. Clark and Miss Inskeep attended the meeting. Mrs. Clark was elected president of the Department in 1908 and was later director of the R. C. A. Victor Talking Machine Educational Department. In 1918 a committee of ten members, the Educational Council, was formed, and Miss Inskeep was the only woman elected to this group.

Around 1920, Ottumwa had a creditable symphony orchestra which gave concerts both here

and in surrounding towns, often with the assistance of nationally known soloists. Later came the Presbyterian Little Symphony, and through the years there were many small orchestral combinations such as the Ottumwa Harp Orchestra, mandolin clubs, and string trios.

Each decade has seemed to bring forth a new group of leaders in Ottumwa's musical life. During the 1930's the musical ability of Sister Mary Colette, head of the department of music at Ottumwa Heights College, was prominently recognized. Performances of her choral works with orchestral accompaniments were heard and greeted with high praise.

Then there is Isabelle M. Hofmann, who has appeared countless times as a concert pianist, and who has labored unceasingly to create and foster interest in better music. Another familiar figure in the twenties was Catherine McFarland Dwight, soprano, who later returned to her native city, Burlington. Among her several published songs two favorites have been "Hush Thee, My Own" and "Only and Forever".

All of Ottumwa is proud of Alberta Powell Graham, whose life from early childhood until recent years was spent in Ottumwa. Mrs. Graham directed many fine choruses, has written innumerable songs, stories, and plays for children, and has

supervised public school music in the Ottumwa schools. Although she has become in the last few years of living in the nation's capital a successful author of books on Washington, D. C., and the presidents, she is still true to her first love, children's rote songs.

A recent gift of Ottumwa to the musical world is Harold Ayres, who has been hailed by critics everywhere as one of the most gifted of the younger violinists. Born in 1901, Harold was taken to Chicago at the age of ten years to study with the finest teachers there. Leopold Auer pronounced him at sixteen, the "most promising pupil I have found in America". Besides his extensive teaching and recording, Ayres was for fifteen years concert master of the Minneapolis Symphony. Resigning in 1945, he went to California, where he is currently concert master of the Werner-Jannsen Symphony. Another Ottumwa-born musician of the present is Edmund Haines, well-known composer of orchestral music.

These and many others laid the foundations of musical Ottumwa. Space does not permit mention of many present-day Ottumwa musicians who are ably carrying on the tradition.

RUTH W. STEVENS